

Farmers, cities shun septic tank wastes

By Tim Richard
staff writer

Country living — on rural roads and with septic tanks — is growing more popular, particularly in western Oakland County.

But farmers and municipal sewage treatment plants are increasingly reluctant to accept the wastes pumped from septic tanks.

"We're beginning to develop a crisis," said Dan O'Neill, chief of land applications for the state Department of Natural Resources.

"It's not just a state problem. It's hot just an individual septic hauler's problem. It's a county and township problem, too," O'Neill told a meeting of the Arcadia Water Quality Board last week.

AWQB PASSED a resolution saying sewage treatment plants "must" — in the short run at a minimum — step up to the problem wherever possible to avoid impending health and environmental threats.

For the long term, AWQB called on county agencies to seek disposal options, including joint solutions to reduce staff costs.

Currently, rural homes, restaurants and businesses generate 39 million gallons of septic waste a year in the seven-county southeastern Michigan region. That volume will increase to about 55 million gallons by the year 2000, based on population growth estimates, according to Jack Durbin, Washtenaw County public works director.

Oakland County is leading the way by issuing 6,200 septic system permits in the last six years compared to 4,000 in Livingston County, 3,800 in Macomb and lesser numbers in Washtenaw, Wayne, St. Clair and Monroe counties.

Oakland has about one-third of all unsewered housing units in the region, according to AWQB reports. It's projected that by 2000 Oakland will have 102,000 unsewered units — four times as many as the next closest county, Livingston.

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MEANWHILE, PLACES to dump the waste — farms and wastewater plants — are becoming scarcer.

Jack London, a septic waste hauler from Macomb County, said, "The farmer has trouble with septic trucks placing runs in his field. His neighbors will shun him, fearful he'll be putting poisonous things in the soil."

"Pretty soon he'll shut down because he doesn't like the soil compaction and the cold shoulder he's getting from his neighbors," London said, adding that farms can't spread the waste on frozen soil during winter months.

A Warren official said his city's wastewater plant is refusing septic waste because of odors, truck traffic and the fear of toxic chemicals that are finding their way even into household wastes.

Ypsilanti's plant has cut by half the volume it will accept. A Royal Oak plant has reduced its hours by closing on evenings and weekends, London reported.

DNR's O'NEILL explained some of the reluctance of municipal plants to accept wastes: "Septage is more concentrated than everyday sewage. It can be a shock to the system if it's dumped all at once. It may cause

them to violate their discharge permit limits into a river."

Ed Hogan, representing the Detroit Water and Sewerage System, said restaurant septic waste is a particular problem because it contains fats, oils and grease.

But Hogan added that Detroit is willing to make contracts with public agencies (suburban governments) to accept it. "Detroit is willing to negotiate with any county it serves," he said.

Other plants still accepting the wastes are in Wyandotte, Monroe and Ann Arbor, according to James Murray, AWQB chair and Washtenaw County drain commissioner.

AWQB MEMBERS, local officials and haulers agreed that costs will rise, both because of tighter new state regulations on haulers and increasing treatment costs.

"The homeowner used to paying \$50 a year to handle wastes will find their costs are going to go up," said London. "The first guy (hauler) to raise his rates loses all his business. The last guy to raise his rates is the one who's dumping it illegally."

"Their disposal rates could increase to five times what they are now," said London, who serves Macomb and Oakland counties.

Durbin, the Washtenaw DPW director, said it's recommended that septic tanks be pumped every three years, "but in practice it's more like every four or five years."

Older tanks have capacities of 500-1,000 gallons, but newer, larger residences have tanks with 1,000-2,000 gallons capacity, Durbin said.

WASHTENAW officials are considering other options, Durbin added.

These include composting and pre-treating the waste in "package" septic treatment plants before sending them on to wastewater treatment plants.

Ted Westmeir, Livingston County environmental health director, said 85 percent of his county is served by septic tanks, and the waste is hauled to 25 land sites, some as far away as Genesee and Washtenaw counties.

"We need to help haulers find more sites," he said.

John Timm, St. Clair County environmental health director, said wastewater treatment plants are the

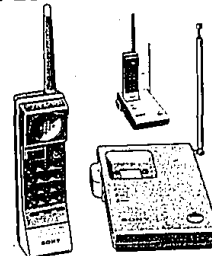
answer in his area because the high water table makes it difficult to use land sites.

JANIS BOBBIN, AWQB manager, said disposal options must be locally available, environmentally sound and affordable.

AWQB is responsible for seeking compliance with water quality policies contained in the regional water quality plan, adopted under the federal Clean Water Act of 1972.

AWQB reviews local development proposals from a regional standpoint.

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